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ABSTRACT

To describe the eating habits of the children and adults on several popular prime time television series, this study examined the latent content of television messages concerned with health care and nutrition. A sample of nine episodes of "The Cosby Show," "Growing Pains" and "Family Ties," during the 1986-87 season was studied. Each program was analyzed with regard to what was eaten, by whom, and at what meal or snack (200 servings of food were coded in all). Findings show that (1) on television, children eat more selections of healthy food than adults do (the study revealed patterns of unhealthy eating choices by adults); and (2) 50% of the food items consumed on these programs are consumed as snacks. (Seven tables of data are included.) (MS)

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An Analysis of Television Family
Nutrition and Eating Habits

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It is generally accepted that television has considerable impact on social learning and as a transmitter of values. Hamburg and Pierce, for example, describe it as "one of the primary agencies of socialization that our society possesses" (1982, p. 288). Even in the popular press television is attributed with the power to demonstrate ways to handle family roles, values and attitudes (Kalter, 1988). Dr. Joyce Brothers recommends certain television programs for their models of how parents should behave in real life families (1989).

Among the issues of interest to researchers concerned with television and social learning are the manifest and latent content of television programs. Manifest content includes such content as the "portrayals of family roles on television--the inept father and the 'ding-bat' homemaker mother--and the demographic characteristics of those in various occupations, etc." (McLeod, Fitzpatrick, Glynn, & Fallis, 1982, p. 277). Research concerned with this issue has produced descriptions of the portrayal of women, family

roles, and various minorities, for example (e.g. Greenberg, 1980).

Latent content includes "those subtle messages that may be independent of plot" (McLeod, et al., p. 277), such as how conflict is handled, how relationships are portrayed, and what activities occur outside of the plot line. Research concerned with this issue includes descriptions of the drinking process on television (Breed & De Foe, 1981), and descriptions of family role interactions (Greenberg, Buerkel-Rothfuss, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 1980).

The area of latent content of television messages under study here is concerned with health care and nutrition. Hamburg and Pierce note that a number of health care issues and behaviors portrayed on television warrant examination, and that nutrition and dietary patterns are among them (1982). The concern is based on the knowledge that poor nutrition and problems associated with obesity continue to plague Americans in general. To the degree that television influences ones eating habits, the roles available on television are of concern.

Purpose and Method

The research here sought to describe the eating habits of the children and adults on several popular prime time television series. Specifically, with regard to the beverages and solid food items consumed on television, the questions for study were:

1. Are they primarily healthy or unhealthy?
2. Are they eaten more by adults or children?
3. At what meals are they eaten?

The three programs examined, The Cosby Show, Growing Pains, and Family Ties, were chosen because they have consistently had high ratings (NBC wins, 1986), thus exposure to large numbers of viewers, and, especially, because they are also in the top ten list of Kids' favorite television shows ("Kids' favorite," 1989). An available sample of nine episodes of each program during the 1986-87 season was studied.

Each program was analyzed with regard to what was eaten, by whom, and at what meal or snack. Food eaten was coded by serving, as beverage or solid, and as healthy or unhealthy. A serving was a portion of food intended for

consumption by one person. So, for example, salads prepared for five people for dinner were counted as five servings. Five main courses of fish were five more servings of food, even though the fish was served at the same meal. Further, to be counted, the food or beverage item had to be visible and intended for consumption at a specific time. For example, a phone call to order pizza was not counted, nor was a bag of groceries being unloaded in the kitchen.

In coding food type, beverages were intended to be drunk. All other food items were coded as solid food.

The development of a definition of "healthy" or "nutritious" food was difficult, especially in light of current recommendations about the risks associated with items such as sodium, cholesterol, organ meats, Alaskan salmon, or even fresh fruit from Mexico and South America. The definition used here was based on the work of Kaufman (1980), who analyzed the nutritional value of foods referred to on prime time television during the 1977 season, and the work of Guthrie (1977), who worked to develop criteria for judging the nutritive value of foods for use by the Federal Trade Commission. The primary concern of both of them was

the concept of "empty calories," and most food items which build and maintain body tissue or regulate body processes, in addition to providing energy, were evaluated as nutritious. Guthrie's list of nutritious foods included red meat, organ meat, bacon, cheese, ice cream and pizza, along with such items as fresh vegetables, poultry and yogurt. Non-nutritious foods included items with excessive fat and/or sugar content such as dessert items and soft drinks. For the purposes of the study here, then, healthy food items were those with significant nutritive value, including pizza, ice cream and cheese and crackers, as well as salads and fruit juices. Unhealthy food items were those with excessive fat and/or sugar content, or containing stimulants or alcohol. This included dessert items as well as potato chips, coffee and soft drinks.

Persons eating were coded as adults or children. Children included older children living at home, Alex Keaton, the college student on Family Ties, for example.

The meal eaten was coded as breakfast, lunch, dinner or snack. A meal was a menu of items intended for a group eating together, containing courses typical of a meal. A

snack referred to one or several eating a snack item or a single course (e.g. an apple), not at a meal time. So, for example, pizza served as a meal would be coded a meal, while the same item served while watching television would be coded a snack.

Intercoder reliability between two coders was 1.0 on who was eating, and above .80 on the other variables, using Holsti's formula (Wimmer & Dominick, 1987).

Results and Discussion

Across all three programs, 200 servings of food were coded. As is apparent from Table 1, chi square analysis revealed that significantly more servings of food were healthy (60%) than were unhealthy. This is in marked contrast to Kaufman's (1980) work which concluded that twice as many food items referred to in prime time were negative as were positive nutritionally. Interestingly, there are significant differences between adults and children with regard to the healthiness of what is consumed. Adults eat more unhealthy than healthy food, while children eat nearly twice as much healthy food as unhealthy food. Given the

general outcry over the eating habits of America's youth, this was an unexpected result.

With regard to what meals are eaten and how healthy they are, 50% of the servings coded are consumed as a snack (See Table 2). Further, those snack items are primarily unhealthy. The chi square analysis presented in Table 3 makes apparent that the primary culprits are adults who consume three times as many unhealthy snacks as healthy ones. Dinner on television is the healthiest meal. Menu items include fish, vegetables, and many, many servings of tossed salads. Breakfast is also a healthy meal, and regularly includes cereal, juice and fresh fruit. Lunch on television is rare, and when it is eaten, it is eaten solely by children.

With regard to the meals eaten by children and adults, again, both groups consume more servings of food as a snack than at any other meal (See Table 4). More than 50% of what children eat is eaten as a snack, while nearly 50% of what adults eat is eaten as a snack. Chi square analysis shows that the patterns of eating at breakfast and lunch are significantly different from expected patterns. Sign 2

ificantly more breakfasts are eaten by adults in proportional terms. Adults are never seen eating lunch, although 10% of the food items eaten by children are eaten at lunch/.

With regard to the healthiness of beverages compared to solid food items, significantly fewer healthy beverages are consumed compared to unhealthy ones (See Table 5). The unhealthy beverages are primarily consumed by adults who consume three times more unhealthy beverages than healthy ones (See Table 6). Those beverages are primarily coffee, tea and soft drinks. Adults rarely drink milk, fruit juices or water.

Although chi square analysis revealed that children's consumption of beverages is also more unhealthy than expected, their consumption of beverages is approximately equally healthy and unhealthy (See Table 7). Their consumption of healthy solid food items is nearly four times as great as their consumption of unhealthy solid food items.

Conclusion

A number of important conclusions can be drawn from the data presented here. First, it is apparent that on television children eat more selections of healthy food than adults do. This may contribute to some good habits formed by adolescent and pre-adolescent viewers. However, a limitation of this study is that the concept of "healthy" is based on the central consideration that food is "healthy" unless it is made up of "empty calories." A number of the items categorized here as "healthy" using Guthrie's system, such as cheese and nuts, might be categorized as "unhealthy" using another system. In such a case, the models presented for social learning would not contribute as positively to healthy food choices. At the same time, in terms of the notion of anticipatory socialization, even using Guthrie's system adults on television do not offer positive models of eating behavior.

Second, fully half of the food items consumed on these programs are consumed as snacks. This is a large increase from the work of Gerbner, Morgan and Signorielli (1979) who described 39 percent of all eating or drinking episodes as snacking. To those concerned that so much of Americans'

eating behavior occurs as snacking, these television programs suggest that the models for eating available on television have become, if anything, worse, than they were previously.

It would seem that those who write and produce for television could very easily make a positive impact in these areas of role modeling. The food and beverage items in the programs studied here were rarely integral parts of the plot. Their presence was usually in the form of stage business, or even in set decoration. In most cases, healthy food items could very easily be substituted for unhealthy ones. For example, healthy beverages could easily be used much more often as a snack beverage. Indeed, among children, orange juice was often the snack beverage. The quantities of coffee, tea and soft drinks consumed by adults was not necessary to plot development.

A number of areas warrant further examination. The work here studied the eating behaviors on three highly rated and praised prime time family oriented programs. It would be useful to know to what degree these patterns of eating behaviors exist throughout prime time programming, during

daytime programming, and specifically during programming aimed at children.

Further, an examination of the degree to which families eat meals together would be valuable to describe. In the study here, while large numbers of food items were dinner items, a family seen eating the meal together was not common. Viewers saw food preparation for a whole family clearly taking place, but did not often see the whole family eating it. This modeling example for viewers would be important to describe.

Another related issue concerns who does the meal preparation. Do children assist with it? To what degree are fathers involved? These three particular programs include fathers who are very involved in the activities of their families, and they often participated in meal preparation. Do these patterns exist in other types of programming?

Further, the depiction of many other behaviors related to health habits, wellness, fitness, etc., could fruitfully be studied by those interested in the impact of television on social learning.

In conclusion, this study of the eating patterns of adults and children on prime time television reveals a patterns of unhealthy eating choices by adults, and an extremely heavy emphasis on eating snacks.

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Table 1

Healthy and Unhealthy Consumption

	Healthy N	%	Unhealthy N	%
Adults	32	46	38	54
Children	87	67	43	33

χ^2 (1, $N = 200$) = 8.493, $p < .01$

Table 2

Healthy and Unhealthy Meals

	Healthy N	%	Unhealthy N	%	Total N
Breakfast	14	67	7	33	21
Lunch	8	62	5	38	13
Dinner	54	82	12	18	66
Snack	43	43	57	57	100

$\chi^2 (3, N = 200) = 25.410, P < .01$

Table 3

Healthy and Unhealthy Snacks

	Healthy N	%	Unhealthy N	%
Adults	8	25	24	75
Children	35	51	33	49

$\chi^2 (1, N = 100) = 6.73, p < .01$

Table 4

Meals Eaten by Children and Adults

	Children		Adults	
	N	%	N	%
Breakfast	10	8	11	16
Lunch	13	10	--	--
Dinner	39	30	27	39
Snack	68	52	32	46

$\chi^2 (3, N = 200) = 13.03, P < .01$

Table 5

Healthy and Unhealthy Beverages and Food

	Healthy N	%	Unhealthy N	%	Total N
Beverage	36	40	53	60	89
Food	83	75	28	25	111

$\chi^2 (1, N = 200) = 24.151, P < .01$

Table 6

Healthy and Unhealthy Consumption of Beverages and Food by Adults

	Healthy N	%	Unhealthy N	%
Beverages	9	25	27	75
Food	23	68	11	32

$\chi^2 (1, N = 70) = 12.815, P < .01$

Table 7

Healthy and Unhealthy Consumption of Beverages And Food by Children

	Healthy N	%	Unhealthy N	%
Beverages	27	51	26	49
Food	60	78	17	22

$\chi^2 (1, N = 130) = 10.322, P < .01$